

GROUNDS FOR GRATITUDE.

A

DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED ON

THANKSGIVING DAY,

NOVEMBER 28, 1861,

IN THE

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,

LITCHFIELD, CONN.

BY

GEORGE RICHARDS.

LITCHFIELD:
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Litchfield, December 4, 1861.

REV. GEO. RICHARDS, DEAR SIR :

The undersigned having listened with much pleasure to the Discourse preached by you on the occasion of the annual Thanksgiving, and believing that its publication will be the means of disseminating correct views in relation to the duties of all good men in this crisis of our National affairs, respectfully request a copy of the same for that purpose.

FREDERICK BUEL,
JASON WHITING,
H. R. COIT,
CHARLES ADAMS,
H. W. BUEL,
JAMES B. PECK,
P. S. BEEBE.

Litchfield, December 9, 1861.

GENTLEMEN :

Yielding to your judgment in the matter, I with pleasure submit my Discourse to your disposal.

Very respectfully yours,

GEORGE RICHARDS.

MESSRS. FRED. BUEL, JASON WHITING, and others.

DISCOURSE.

ESTHER ix:19.

A DAY OF GLADNESS AND FEASTING, AND A GOOD DAY, AND OF SENDING PORTIONS
ONE TO ANOTHER.

A DESCRIPTION of an ancient Thanksgiving, celebrated thousands of years ago, thousands of miles away, in the Capital, and among the walled towns and villages of Persia. It was kept by the Jews, in commemoration of their signal deliverance from the malice and craft of Haman and his confederates, who had plotted for their destruction. The mischief so artfully contrived for others had recoiled upon the heads of its unprincipled designers. From the lofty gallows, reared for their victims, dangled its baffled builders. No wonder sorrow was turned into joy, lamentation into exultation, fasting into feasting.

The Metropolis, which, on that gladsome occasion, over-ran with festive mirth and every token of gratulation, now stretches, twelve miles of ruins, along the banks of the Choaspes, amid whose silent solitudes lion and hyena keep their feast days. The sceptre of Empire, wrested from the Persian by the Greek, from the Greek by the Roman, has passed to still other hands. But the Jew, subject to each in turn, clinging, under all, to the old faith, the old customs,—not devoid of the old sentiment of gratitude,—celebrates yet, in cities, and towns, and villages, never his own, that same Feast of Purim, now as at the first, “A day of gladness and feasting, and a good day, and of sending portions, one to another.”

We are met to observe the time-honored Festival bequeathed us by our fathers. With a solemn and chastened joy did they first set it apart; for it was from amid hardships, trials, dangers, reverses, that they looked gratefully and trustfully to God. We, like them, smile through our tears. Few of us have ever before greeted this occasion amid the calamities of war; none of us amid the horrors of civil war. The conspiracy from which the Jew was mercifully rescued was concocted by foreigners; ours by fellow citizens; his had reached an end, fatal only to its contrivers; ours still lingers on, disastrous to all; then the scores of thousands who had wantonly drawn the sword perished by it; now the loyal and the disloyal, the friends of order and the foes of order, immolate each other. And yet, this is not a time to dispense with gratitude to God. We may always thank Him, in the touching language of the Liturgy, "for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all, for his inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory."

But more than this: these very calamities that have overwhelmed us, have their bright side as well as their dark side; while, in no aspect, should they prompt to murmuring against Providence, but only to penitence and self-reproach, in many aspects they call loudly for the joyful recognition of God's hand, overruling the blindness and pride of some to the well-being of others, "from seeming evil, still educing good."

What blessings, then, springing up in the path of this unnatural and inhuman strife, afford renewed occasion for Thanksgiving?

First, is our Public Credit. We entered upon this conflict with a treasury all but bankrupt. Nearly empty at the start, how was it ever to be replenished, with trade, foreign and domestic, at a stand, with exhausting drafts on the laboring classes for recruits, with the loss and damage inseparable from intestine strife, and a daily expenditure of about two millions? For how many months, or weeks, could this stupendous outlay be persisted in, and the government not become a beggar, vainly knocking at the doors of all the money-changers in the world?

Heretofore Cotton, our chief article of export, had counterbalanced a large share of our foreign purchases, the balance having to be paid mainly in gold. Suppose Cotton to stay at home, how could the

enormous deficiency be supplied, and any specie be left for government or people? And yet money, useful in peace, is essential in war. The purse is not a whit less effective than the sword. The prospect looked dark enough. See now what has been brought to pass.

First, an increased rate of duties, coupled with a diminished demand for foreign products, has almost stopped our importations. When we cease to buy we have no longer to pay. Again, abundant harvests have filled our granaries with breadstuffs, ample for ourselves, and leaving a large surplus for the needy. Foreign countries, meantime, restricted in their supplies have to look to us to make good their deficiency. Buying our grain at liberal prices, while we refuse their manufactures, they can only pay us in coin, and hence a constant transfer of gold and silver from the Old world to the New. Add to this the receipt of some sixty millions from the rocks and sands of the Pacific, and we see how the banks of our leading cities, besides reasonably accommodating the mercantile community, can loan the government three times fifty millions of dollars and yet remain sound and solvent. We see, too, how private individuals can buy in the national scrip with every assurance that their means are well invested.

We have only to picture to ourselves the gloom and dismay which the opposite state of things would have engendered, to realize the occasion we have for devoutest thankfulness.

Notice, secondly, the Rally of the People in their country's defence. What would money avail without men?

We entered on this struggle, not without many anxieties, as to where the lines were to be drawn. Our great commercial, and mercantile, and financial metropolis, necessarily a chief centre of our operations in peace and war, it was roundly asserted, would secede. Then the Central States, we were threatened, would form one Confederacy; the Western, another; the Eastern, another; the far Western, still another: while the South was to be a unit. How is it? Were we of the North ever so strongly and inseparably linked as at this moment? From the Atlantic to the Pacific, the electric cord that joins us thrills with a single word, "Union." Nor is this all. Delaware, Maryland, Western Virginia, two counties, at least, of Eastern Virginia, openly and unconditionally espouse their country's cause. Kentucky and Missouri too are battle grounds, by no

means released from their allegiance, but where the National flag is still flung to the breeze, and the national arms are struggling for the mastery.

In response to the call of the Chief Magistrate—a man raised up, it would seem, for this very exigency—whose quiet energy, and moderation, and singleness of aim, inspire general confidence—State after State has assumed its quota of men and means, till, in the space of a few short months, half a million of Volunteers are enlisted, well fed, well clothed, well sheltered and equipped with all the enginery of war; officered by men, many of them, of thorough training, large experience, approved valor; the Veteran Commander, who has retired in the plenitude of years and honors, having cheerfully surrendered his staff to the gifted soldier who has succeeded him. Then, besides, co-operating on the Sea, is our gallant Navy, counting its men-of-war, its gunboats, its transports, by hundreds; ably manned and officered, and seemingly qualified and destined to repeat the exploits of Decatur, and Perry, and MacDonough, and their associates, in an earlier conflict.

Contrast this preparation, however imperfect, for the stern conflicts of the winter, with the utter lack of preparation for the summer, then ask yourself, whether there is not additional ground for gratitude to a benignant Providence.

Look, thirdly, to our Foreign Relations. Great anxiety has been felt lest leading European Nations should side against us. They do not want, perhaps, inducements so to do, but are there not strong counter inducements? England and France need Cotton, it is said, and must have it, or their operatives will starve or rise in mutiny; hence their governments must look favorably upon the South: but both these Nations equally need breadstuffs, and must look for their supplies largely to the North. Moreover, in the turmoil that now convulses Europe, each Power has about enough to do at home, in strengthening its influence and husbanding its resources, without alienating a distant and powerful ally. Then, again, Russia is friendly to us, so is Prussia, so are the German populations generally. Should western Europe throw its weight against us, central and eastern might throw theirs for us. Then besides, while Poland is threatening to desert the Czar, and Hungary and Croatia to secede from Austria, and Italy to absorb Venetia, while Ireland is fretting under

the British yoke, and the French Emperor and the Priesthood are at loggerheads, it seems hardly the time, for either, or all of them, to encourage anarchy and revolution across the seas. Even Kings who live in glass houses, should not throw stones.

But further. Look at the delegations from these same foreign states; heirs to the throne, princes of the blood, nobles, captains, bred to the art of war, their life spent in camps, their courage and prowess tested on hard-fought fields, tendering their services; assigned to places on our staffs, or entrusted with responsible commands, or leaving rank and file with the true martial spirit,—worthy successors of the La Fayettees, the Steubens, the De Kalbs, the Kosciuskos of other times.

Nor is this all. Scores of regiments, whose titles and badges and watchwords denote their foreign extraction, organized under officers of kindred origin, have volunteered in aid of their adopted country, and are surpassed by none, in zeal and devotion to the cause. The world, then, is not quite all against us. For thus much of hearty sympathy and effective co-operation, let us be thankful.

Notice, fourthly, some Noble Qualities which this struggle is eliciting. War, above all civil war, is a pursuit so demoralizing in many of its tendencies, that we are tempted to deny to it any redeeming features. And yet, a conflict for the right, in the right spirit, whether waged with the pen, or the tongue, or the sword, develops the best traits of our humanity.

We are by nature selfish. In a country like ours and among a people like ours, this predisposition is strongly appealed to. Shrewd, calculating, acquisitive, we are liable to overlook the claims of others in an inordinate regard for our own. Peace, and the pursuits which peace promotes, tend to aggravate this evil.

Has not this war, lament it as we may, served as a partial counter-active to self-seeking? Think of the groups of women, over this land, deserting their homes and domestic cares and gathering to sew and knit for our volunteers. Think of the time, and pains, and means expended in providing them comfortable stores, furnishing the hospitals, looking after the sick and wounded, anticipating suffering and privation likely to occur, supplying bibles, tracts, useful books, teachers, needful alike to the sick and the well. This charitable and practical solicitude for the welfare of our fellow beings, aroused on so great a

scale, is in itself an inestimable good, worth, perhaps, all that it costs, even if it accomplished nothing for the sufferers. It is the blessedness of giving, as distinguished from the blessedness of receiving.

Then again, the economy which the present state of things enforces is invaluable. We are unquestionably the most extravagant of nations. Money is made more easily here than elsewhere, and spent as easily.

A European family would live, and thrive, on what we throw away. The highest classes of the old country are astounded at the sums we lavish upon our table, our wardrobe, our furniture, our equipage, and all the nameless *et ceteras*, which we can scarcely dispense with, but which they rarely indulge in. This generous outlay, while especially characterizing our large towns and cities, is not confined to them. What a change within the twelve month. The annual importation of New York alone has diminished by some hundred millions. Where it sent abroad a year ago over forty millions in gold, it has sent abroad this year three millions. The half-worn silks, velvets, jewels, furs, carpets, mirrors and the like, if not of the very latest styles and patterns, have been made to answer ; while wines, brandies, and the like luxuries have been used more abstemiously, or dispensed with altogether. Now such reduction, trying, doubtless, to the foreign trader and producer, is clear gain to the consumer. We are better off without such superfluities than with them. This priding ourselves on what we heap upon our backs, or put around our fingers, or range along our walls, instead of what we accumulate in our heads and hearts is, after all, but a mean, ignoble ambition. The discipline that whips this folly out of us, is, so far, salutary.

Again, this war is retrenching our party spirit. We know how it has been in years past. Nominations for office, cut and dried in secret conventicles, then adopted in public caucus, have next been thrust upon the public. The least scrupulous men have ordinarily stood the fairest chance. The political organs, enlisted on either side, while lauding and extolling their own favorites, have decried and defamed their opponents. The bitter rancor, originated at headquarters, has traveled down, and out, through the community. Few men, sensitive to their good name, care to expose themselves to this storm of obloquy. As a consequence, our penitentiaries and state-prisons would be searched in vain for any more incorrigible scoundrels

than some, who year after year have been aldermen and mayors and marshals in our chief cities, to say nothing of others who have found their way into Legislative Halls, and the National Cabinet. Not that respectable men have not been associated with them. Not that respectable men have not voted for them. Otherwise they would not have been elected.

Now the case is altered. Men of character and standing are selected from all the parties, placed on a single ticket, and elevated in company to responsible positions. They are a salutary restraint upon each other, they qualify and modify each other's views, the measures they adopt are likely to be creditable to themselves, and serviceable and satisfactory to their constituents.

Another quality developed by the times is a genuine patriotism. Our nationality has been largely an abstraction, too vague and indefinable, to take strong hold on our affections. We have wondered how the Englishman, so heavily taxed, so oppressed by an aristocracy, church and state the double incubus which his small earnings must help to carry, can be so loyal to Merry England, and so ready to risk all, and lose all, in her defence. Now, we begin to see. The problem is becoming solved. We too can say with Cowper,

“With all thy faults I love thee still, my country.”

That country embraces most that we most prize, its institutions were bequeathed us by our fathers, its existence is in imminent jeopardy, and the question is, do we prize it highly enough, to give for it, to suffer for it, to fight for it, to die for it? We find we do. Need I say, how many parents have relinquished their sons, how many sisters their brothers, how many wives their husbands, how many maidens their lovers, to brave the dangers of the bloody field, and the slippery deck.

Need I repeat how multitudinous a host, not a man drafted, have left home, and friends, and the sweet scenes of peace, not unaware of the experience before them, of its desperate exposures and privations, but firmly resolved to venture everything rather than see the starry flag go down. Millions of men and women, hitherto as cold and impassive as any of us, are kindling with the old revolutionary fervor, and glorying in the old revolutionary sacrifices. Yes, let us thank God, that the fires of Lexington and Concord, of Bennington and Saratoga, of Valley Forge and Yorktown, are kindling again.

It were worth something, much of treasure and of life, to revive the conviction that we are brethren and owe a common allegiance to a common country.

One other virtue developed by this struggle may be specified,—the reverent recognition of God. Continuous prosperity tends to atheism. “Lest I be full” said Agur, “and deny Thee; and say, who is the Lord?”

With nations, as with individuals, to have their own way is to become self-reliant and lose sight of their dependence. Adversity teaches us a different lesson. We learn who is the Ruler of the world; who “speaks and it is done, commands, and it stands fast.”

Do we not detect in our national fast-days and humiliations, so extensively observed, in the chastened tone of the secular press, in the multiplied petitions for our country on sabbath days and week days, in the public provision for religious worship and instruction throughout our fleets and armies, as well as in the prevalent temper and spirit of the people, gratifying evidence that the Supreme Being is increasingly acknowledged as the arbiter of all destinies, whose smile is life, whose frown is death, and whose favor and protection it becomes us, first and chief, to seek. But turning from these better dispositions thus infused among the people,

Notice, fifthly, the Light that is being shed upon our relations to Slavery. This, in all periods of our national history, has been the apple of discord. Its palpable discordance with our own boasted liberty, was felt by the founders of our institutions, who sought to provide for its diminution and ultimate extinction.

A Connecticut invention which gave enhanced value to cotton, gave enhanced value to slaves, hence their owners grew reluctant to part with them. Political combinations, North and South, made a pro-slavery policy the prevailing policy of the country. What it is convenient to do, we readily convince ourselves we ought to do, and thus we have gone on, rival parties at the north bidding higher and higher for the approval of the south, till we had well nigh made slavery national and constitutional, freedom sectional and exceptional. Then it was that a kind Providence interposed, stopped us on the brink of the yawning gulf, split our unhallowed alliances to atoms, and arrayed us brother against brother in a strife, which, bad as it is, is infinitely better than the truce which had almost

been substituted for it. Now that we of the north have paused and reflected, we have retraced our steps; gone back to the original ground, that freedom is a better thing than bondage, at least for white men. We are beginning to realize that colored people, even, may have rights, "inalienable rights, among which is Liberty," and hence that in bargaining away their inborn prerogatives, agreeing to aid in suppressing and extinguishing them, we have arrayed Justice itself against us and bared our necks to its naked sword. There evidently is an increasing conscience on this subject, a livelier sympathy with the oppressed, a strengthening desire and determination, without fear or favor for any, to ascertain our duty, and to do it. The conviction is gaining ground that a nation so great as ours has little else to fear, but Sin and God. For this, especially, let us give thanks.

Observe, sixthly and finally, our timely Reverses and Successes. For a while this struggle seemed to go against us. The capture of Sumter, the fatal trap at Big Bethel, the deadly repulse at Bull Run, the utter panic and route at Manassas, were gloomy chapters, in the opening of a campaign of whose results we had been so sanguine. Sad and disheartening as were these reverses, they were probably none too many, none too disastrous, to unite us among ourselves, to teach us with whom we had to deal, and that if we were to conquer a peace, we must advance, not, as we had fondly hoped, with the sword in one hand and the olive branch in the other, but, with the sword in both hands.

Educated, by this severe but salutary training, up to some due realization of the task we had undertaken, a brighter page, with sunnier pictures, was vouchsafed us. And, to-day, we may tell, not boastingly, but gratefully, of the signal success at Hatteras, of the gradual advance from Washington, of brilliant achievements in Kentucky, of the decisive victory at Port Royal,—the tide of war rolled back where it started, the Stars and Stripes waving over the cradle of Rebellion, our own 7th regiment the first upon the ground,—and last not least, two ringleaders in this conspiracy quietly arrested on the high seas, and now safely ensconced in Boston harbor, in a strong hold of that government which they had done their best to overturn.

These events seem to have been arranged, as if to enable us, with a cheerful and joyful mind, to assemble in the courts of the Lord, even of our fathers' God, and to exalt and magnify his Holy name ;

saying with the Psalmist: "Blessed be the Lord my strength, which teacheth my hands to war and my fingers to fight."

"O, bless our God, ye people, and make the voice of his praise to be heard."

"For thou, O God, hast proved us; thou hast tried us as silver is tried."

"Happy is that people that is in such a case: yea, happy is that people, whose God is the Lord."

But the Home calls us from the Sanctuary. Let us bear away thoughtful yet thankful hearts to board and fireside. Let us recognize the Giver in his abundant gifts, nor forget to be the almoners of his bounty to some less amply furnished.

Places will be vacant to-day under many a roof. Some have removed to homes of their own, which they will help to gladden. Some may be wanderers on land or sea. Some send their thoughts to us from the distant camp,—our contribution to the host, that maintains the rights and vindicates the honor of our native land. Some have passed on, yet farther from us, into "the undiscover'd country, from whose bourn no traveler returns."

We will not forget the absent, nor yet selfishly lament them. If in the path of duty, or enjoying its rewards, we would not call them back. Blessed are the dead, who have wisely lived, and blessed are the living, who shall nobly and bravely die.

To-day is not for sighs, nor for tears; but for smiles and thanksgiving to God.

"Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord. Praise ye the Lord!"